

Sermon for the Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost
 All Saints Day, November 4, 2008
 Trinity Church

In 1936, Marc Connolly wrote a Broadway play called *The Green Pastures*. It dramatized the familiar Bible stories as they might be imagined by rural southern Black folk. In 1936, political correctness had not yet set in, and the play used the dialect and imagery of those rural folk. That probably wouldn't work today, and to quote from it might look like poor taste, except that the line I want you to hear describes so well the mood of our own turbulent times. In the scene about Noah and the flood, as the waters roil and rise, Noah calls out to "De Lawd" and he says, "Lawd, everthin' that was fastened down is comin' loose!"

I can't ignore the fact that this morning's worship is surrounded by a climate of expectancy and no small amount of anxiety in view of Tuesday's election. It is certainly not my role or intention to preach about that, although for many years beginning with the Plymouth Colony election-day sermons were a requirement. I simply need to acknowledge that an especially significant event is on our minds. The campaigning has been contentious. Some people are fearful, some anxious and some angry. My hope is that we do exercise this most important privilege and responsibility of a free people; and that before, during and afterwards, our attitudes and the words and actions that flow from them are marked by the best and noblest of our civic instincts.

Today's Gospel lesson is mysteriously apt for the occasion, as it is apt for the Feast of All Saints. It calls for a careful examination of our values, personal and civic. When Jesus climbed a hillside in Galilee and the crowd gathered around him and he sat down to teach, the economic conditions were more insecure for them than they are for us now. Our anxiety has more to do with what we stand to lose. Theirs was about naked need and immediate threat. And there was also the Roman oppression and the stirring of rebellion. In that setting, what follows is Jesus discourse that we call "the Sermon on the Mount."

As Matthew tells it, the first words from Jesus' mouth were the manifesto for his entire ministry and message. Everything else flows from this single sentence: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." That one sentence lays out the whole scheme of Jesus message, the theme of his entire life and work, and all of his hopes for you and me. All the rest of that marvelous poem that we call "the Beatitudes" the blessings are contained in the first sentence. It folds together the beginning and end of our spiritual pilgrimage. And the aim is the eternal comfort of our souls. That is exactly what it means to be "blessed."

But what does it mean to be "poor in spirit"? That is both the starting-point and the sticking-point, because it is hard to achieve. Our human nature puts up so

many barriers against it. To be “poor in spirit” means to surrender the self, and the self is what most of protect above all else. Beyond the basic necessities of life, most of our effort goes to fortifying the self, with possessions, with achievements, with the esteem of others. To be poor in spirit is to surrender all that has the self in it.

We can’t seem to be able to reach that point of surrender. It just doesn’t factor in human nature; but sometimes life does it for us, and when that happens, it is a blessing, however disguised -- when we are brought to the understanding that all of our human resources are not enough. It makes sense when we read the verse as the Message Bible translates it: “You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you, there is more of God and his rule.”

A lot of our sense of self, of self-worth and self-esteem revolve around possessions. The loss of self depends on an honest assessment of how much we really need as it does on how much we have. A *New Yorker* cartoon has two young executive types conversing over drinks in what looks like an exclusive club. One of them is saying, “There is a time to accumulate and a time to accumulate more.” The irony in that is evident when we watch the stock market roller-coaster and calculate the daily worth of our retirement accounts. To trim our wants to the level of decency and sufficiency is liberating. It gives us the time and energy to enjoy those things that have lasting value -- the love of family, the companionship of friends, the good world, the treasury of human thought and craft. God has given us the Kingdom. We are blessed.

One of the obstacles to the surrender of self and self-interest is our sense of responsibility. -- the idea that our noblest enterprises depend on ourselves alone. I don’t advocate irresponsibility, but you and I need to distinguish between what we can accomplish and where God takes over. Our fixation with our own activity, the blind and passionate commitment to our own dreams and plans, our very finest, most sacrificial aspirations, have the ability to blind us to the larger plans that God has planned.

I may have told this story before. Even if I have, it’s worth telling again. (I have stories I have repeated so often that my family have given them numbers!) When I was a seminary student, I had a job as the student pastor of a small church on the blue-collar outskirts of Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. It was required field work, and it was also a way to supplement the G.I. Bill allowance. The people at Grace Park were the inheritors of a vigorous fundamentalist movement, and Princeton Seminary, still relatively conservative in its theology, had moved away from that kind of fundamentalism. I was a warm body for the pulpit of Leiper Memorial Presbyterian Church, but to some of the folk I was an example of how the Presbyterian Church was going astray. It was uncomfortable and nothing I did

seemed to make any difference.

I finally went to my mentor and supervisor and said, “I have failed. I need to get out.” Frank Stroup’s response was, “Isn’t that rather arrogant of you?” “What?” I said, “Arrogant? I just came in to tell you I’d failed.” Frank said, “It’s arrogant because you seem to think that you are the only one at work out there! Why don’t you give God some credit?”

I can’t tell you that Leiper Memorial Church was transformed, or that I was, but I stuck it out for three years and when I went back twenty-five years later for a visit I found a growing, thriving church. God had better plans than mine. And so it is with so many of our plans and activities. We are so fond of them, so attached to them that we fail to look for what God is doing.

There are critics who say that Jesus was offering false comfort to desperate folk; that he was promising a future heaven as the reward and analgesic for present suffering. It wasn’t that at all. Jesus wasn’t talking about a life in the hereafter. He was talking about the here and now. Heaven is a future promise, but the Kingdom of Heaven is what Jesus was trying to reveal here on earth. That is God’s work in history and our job is to open the way for God to work.

Roger Williams was the founder of the Rhode Island colony in the 1600’s colonial America. He was a Baptist and he established the first Baptist church on the continent. An interesting factoid is that one of his numerous descendants is Julia Ward Howe who wrote the Battle Hymn of the Republic, and Sara Palin. I’m surprised we haven’t heard more about that.

Williams was rare among the founding fathers. For his radical views he was driven out of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Those radical views were, among other things, that he regarded the Native Americans as equal human beings. He advocated the full participation of women in the life of the church when that matter was not even open for discussion. While the Calvinist puritans were saying that, with their harsh laws and their rigid rules they were establishing the kingdom of God on earth, Williams was saying, “That’s nonsense. Our job is to craft the conditions necessary for a decent earth. God’s kingdom is God’s business and you’re headed in the wrong direction.”

“Blessed are the poor in spirit.” It calls for nothing less than a re-orientation of our values. It calls for us, so far as humanly possible, to surrender the inner baggage that we lug around, and we all have it: the absorption with our achievements, with our own troubles and burdens, with our possessions, or with all the thoughts that have a sense of self within them. It is literally to become self-less. And when you are selfless, you are open to all the majesty of God. You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you, there is more of God and God’s rule. It’s a

tough assignment, but even the attempt is a part of the pilgrimage. And at the end is the simple and profound joy of being with God, and to share with all the saints in light the joy of his eternal presence, to whom be all honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.